

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE EARTH

By
Annabelle Winfrey

There is an overwhelming feeling that you are on a journey to the center of the earth when you hike the Grand Canyon. On a sunny June day in 1990 my daughter, Becky, my friend Elaine, and I arrived at the Grand Canyon prepared and ready for our well-planned canyon hike.



My daughter, Becky Ashin, Me and my girlfriend, Elaine Tomkinson

At dinner in the Bright Angel Lodge restaurant on our first night, we learned about the Harvey Girls, waitresses that started working in the lodge in the late 1890's. Fred Harvey was a visionary entrepreneur who paved the way for civilized travel when the West was wild. As a freight agent Harvey traveled by train and experienced the difficulty of finding food along the Western routes. He struck a deal with the Atchison-Topeka and Sante Fe Railway to operate eateries along the rail lines. By 1891 Harvey had 15 Harvey houses in business. He needed a staff of waitresses so he advertised for women ages 18-30 to come West. The ad stated that the women must be unmarried and of "good character."



The Harvey Girls

Harvey's plans included employing the Harvey Girls, in their starched uniforms, at the majestic El Tovar Hotel and the Bright Angel Lodge. There were over 100,000 girls who served as Harvey Girls from 1890 into the 1960's. Of the 47 restaurants, 15 hotels and 30 dining cars on the Sante Fe Railroad, most are gone except El Tovar Hotel and Bright Angel dining rooms.

The next morning, we hurried to the Kaibab Trail Rangers' office and signed up to hike the South Kaibab Trail. Feeling assured we could complete the hike, we hit the trail early in the morning.

We began our descent carrying water, trail mix, and other small snacks. Elaine brought a supply of nutrition bars, one of which became breakfast for a squirrel who stole it out of her back pack which she had laid down outside the only rest stop on the Kaibab trail.

The South Kaibab is a steep, seven-mile treeless trail which follows the lower rim of the Canyon. Spectacular, expansive, rock formations, loom in the distance. This trail is used by the pack mules that carry supplies down to Phantom Ranch and also tourists who are brave enough to ride on them.



Mules on the Trail

The trail is rough, rocky, and narrow and the mules have the “right of way.” Hikers have to hug the rock wall to let them pass. On the trail there is often a rock wall on one side and the other side falls away into deep crevices.

After eight hours of hiking, we finally saw the mule bridge and knew we were almost to the Colorado River. We had surmised that after crossing over the bridge we would see Phantom Ranch but we still had a very laborious mile to go.

After getting settled in our eight-person bunk house we hurriedly followed the aroma of beef stew flowing from the dining building. Thirty-four years later I remember the taste of that delicious stew.



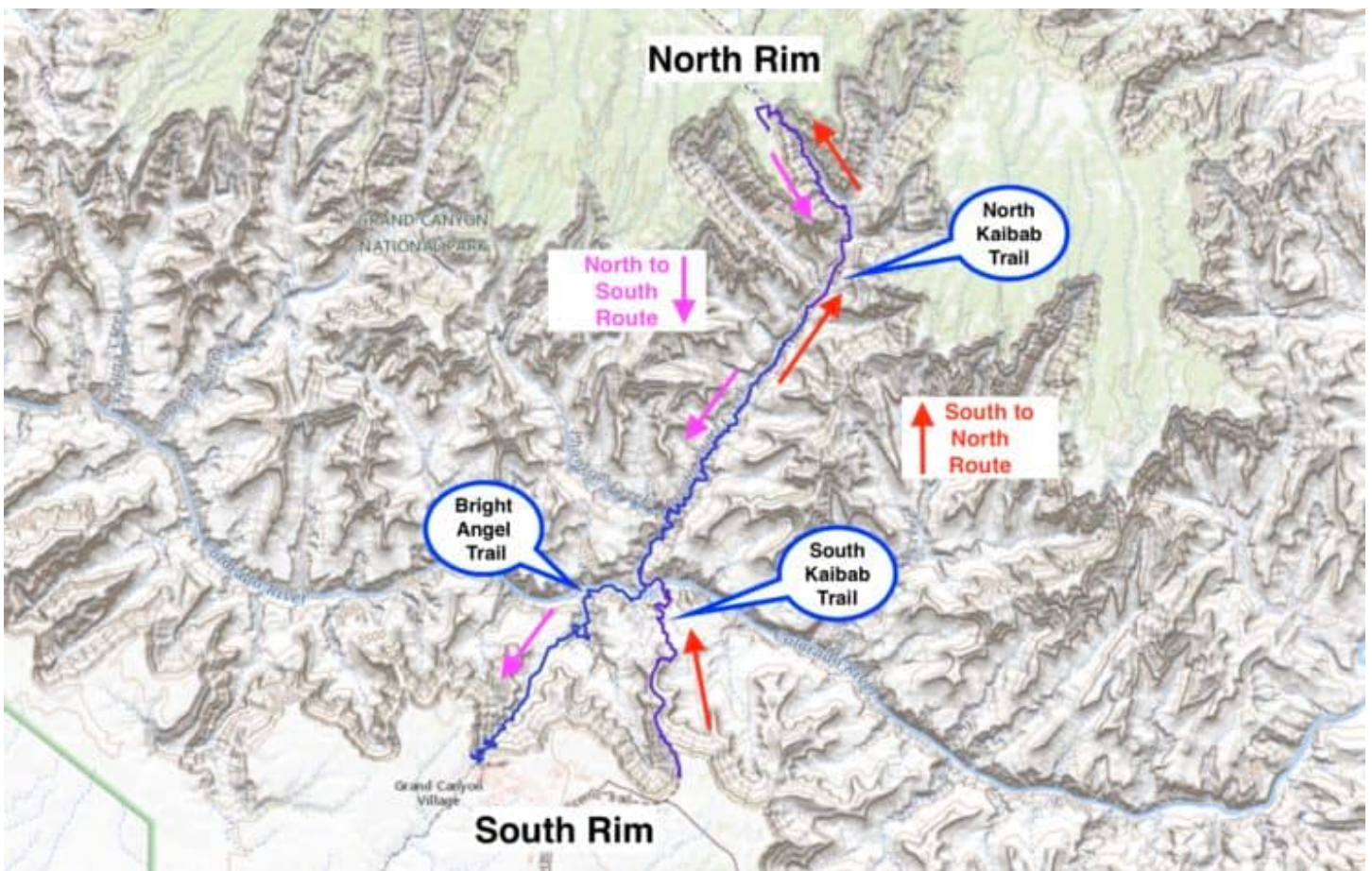
My daughter, Becky Ashin and Me

In the darkness we gathered at a little clearing, as the deer walked among us, to listen to a Forest Ranger's talk about the Canyon. The feeling of adventure filled our souls.

After two wonderful nights at Phantom Ranch, we grabbed a sack lunch and began our 10 hour ascent on the Bright Angel trail.

Bright Angel is a switch back trail wandering deep among the trees, with steep mountains hovering close. Mountain goats stared down at us from their perches high above the trail. At the mule depot, where the mules are stabled, we could finally see Bright Angel Lodge. We realized we were nearing the end of our journey to “the center of the earth.”

The next morning as I walked out the door from the Lodge to look once more at the spectacular Canyon, I heard a father telling his young daughter, “look there’s the bottom of the Canyon,” as he pointed to the mule depot. I said to him, “Sir, there is no way you can see the bottom of the Canyon from here. I know I just climbed up from it yesterday!”



Exercising editor’s prerogative, the above map has been added which shows the two trails hiked by Annabelle and her party. As the arrows indicate, they descended on the South Kaibab Trail and returned on the Bright Angle Trail.

Click Here to email your comments to Annabelle: tnwinfrey@gmail.com